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SUBJECT: IRELAND EXPANDS LINKS THROUGH PM AHERN'S ASIA TRIP

REF: HANOI 2795

1. (SBU) Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Bertie Ahern's October 7-16 visit to Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Bahrain was an opportunity to pursue new diplomatic, commercial, and humanitarian links for Ireland in the region, according to Irish Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) officials who spoke with emboff. The officials said that Ireland's status as a small, open economy, dependent on trade and foreign direct investment, mandated this form of international outreach. On the diplomatic front, Ahern announced on the margins of the October 8-9 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Hanoi that Ireland would open an embassy in Vietnam and include the country in its overseas development program. In Ho Chi Minh City, Ahern opened the Christina Noble Center, an Irish charity for disadvantaged children. In Malaysia, Singapore, and Bahrain, Ahern promoted Ireland as a foreigner-friendly gateway for Asian investment in Europe. DFA officials noted that while no trade deals were signed, Ahern seeded the ground for commercial agreements involving the expat Irish business communities in those countries. More generally, the stops in Malaysia and Singapore offered chances for Ahern to compare the lessons of Ireland's Celtic Tiger economy with his counterparts' Asian Tiger experiences.

2. (SBU) The DFA officials pointed out that human rights had also featured on Ahern's agenda, as the Prime Minister reported during his October 20 briefing on the trip for the Dail (Parliament). Ahern told the Dail that he had criticized Burma's ASEM representatives for not having made "a semblance of progress" and for having "broken their promises" regarding political reforms, human rights and fundamental freedoms. Ahern also recounted that "listening to the responses of their representatives, it appears that they do not accept any of the criticisms of the rest of the democratic world." Ahern informed the Dail that GOI plans to establish diplomatic relations with Burma were on hold, due to the Burmese Government's failure to release Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) from house arrest. (In April, during Ireland's EU presidency, the GOI had made known its plans to exchange ambassadors with Burma on a non-residential basis under certain conditions, including ASSK's release.)

KENNY